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The Problematic Art of Illustrating 'Moxon's Tennyson'

The 1857 illustrated edition of Tennyson's work is an ideal example of how the Pre-Raphaelite movement placed their own stamp on literature. The 'Moxon Tennyson', as it is chiefly known, is an amalgamation of Tennyson's previously published 1830 and 1842 editions, but with illustrations by artists of the day. Moxon, Tennyson's publisher and friend, had to persuade him that an illustrated edition was warranted. June Steffenson Hagen argues that;

*"Tennyson...was reluctant to bring out such a volume, for at least two reasons that we know of: (1) he generally disliked illustrations of his own poems, because 'they never seemed to him to illustrate how own ideas,' and (2) he preferred the simplest style of publication – plain covers, good print, no artwork."*¹

Herein lay a problem. Julia Thomas's analysis, in "*Victorian Illustrations of Tennyson*", states that Tennyson's poetry coincided with a rise in illustrated copies of works.² The cheaper method of printing illustrations using engraved woodblocks allowed the mass production of 'coffee table' books in vogue with the new middle-class and Moxon was keen to tap into this market. Tennyson only seemed to submit when assured that he would receive the necessary funds to allow him to buy a house on the Isle of Wight. Consequently, he was never happy with the Moxon Tennyson and this in part may have doomed it to failure. It was neither a critical nor a commercial success and would be swiftly followed by the untimely passing of Edward Moxon and a fraught relationship between Tennyson and Moxon and Co. from then on.

¹ Charles Tennyson, Unpublished Typescript, "Tennyson's Dealings with his Publishers", Lincoln: Tennyson Research Centre in June Steffensen Hagen, *Tennyson and His Publishers* (London: Macmillan, 1979) pp 7-8

² Julia Thomas, "Always Another Poem: Victorian Illustrations of Tennyson", in Jim Cheshire (Ed.) *Tennyson Transformed: Alfred Lord Tennyson and Visual Culture*, (London: Lund Humphries, 2009) p 21

The first obstacle to commercial success were the spiralling costs of the edition. Moxon paid Tennyson his £2,000 upfront, the artists received £25 for each illustration or engraving with Rossetti receiving £30 for each of his engravings.³ With fifty-four illustrations added to the cost of engraving, cutting and printing it is understandable why the eventual high price of the book was 31s 6d. The usual cost of a comparable book was 5 or 6s so it was priced out of the market and, coupled by a delayed publication date of March 1857, the vital Christmas market was missed.⁴

The second obstacle to critical success lay in the choice of artists to illustrate the edition. Harold Nicholson believes that John Everett Millais may have suggested himself, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Holman Hunt for the commission. These three were to contribute alongside more established, mainstream artists of the day; a total of twenty-four illustrations and woodcuts were shared amongst Thomas Creswick, JC Horsley, William Mulready and Clarkson Stanfield.

To many the publication seemed disjointed *“in part due to the juxtaposition of radically different artistic styles and in part to its high price. It was also known that the poet did not approve of several of the Pre-Raphaelite illustrations, he thought that they exercised too much artistic license.”*⁵

Rossetti was cavalier about deadlines and held publication back on a number of occasions, taking over two years to complete five engravings. However, perhaps, in hindsight, Moxon and Tennyson should have exercised more business and artistic control, as these major obstacles may have been avoided. Moxon allowed *“Rossetti...to procrastinate, first over his choice of*

³ “Dalziel’s Fine Art Books” in Gordon Norton Rae, *The Illustrator and the Book in England from 1790 to 1914*, (The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1976) p 92

⁴ June Steffensen Hagen, p 106

⁵ “The Moxon Illustrated Edition of Tennyson’s Poems”, www.bl.uk/collection-items (25/06/15)

subjects and then over his actual drawings, and to find fault with the engravings of them to an extent that [it] disgusted the other Pre-Raphaelites involved in the project.”⁶

The success of the Moxon Tennyson, I believe, lies in its perceived problems. Here, I will argue that two engravings, which are perceived by some scholars to be problematic, can also be shown to have merit. Rossetti’s first “The Palace of Art” engraving, otherwise known as ‘St. Cecily’, is a visual cacophony of images, many of them not actually included in the poem. (Plate 1) Rossetti and Holman Hunt illustrated directly onto woodblocks, a skill Rossetti was not practised in, therefore no original sketches exist for any of this work. The engraving seems to present a highly sexualised scene where, kneeling, St. Cecily is kissed by an angel; her body is thrown back in ecstasy and he holds her shoulders back whilst she plays the organ. Surrounding the couple are an array of men-at-arms, battlements, cannons, ships and even a soldier placed in the foreground eating an apple. Her submissive pose and the heavily ornate, detailed scene add to the claustrophobic, charged atmosphere. Famously Rossetti aimed to decorate each woodblock as much as he could. When one woodblock was cut one sixteenth of an inch short he complained that he could illustrate a whole city in the space that was missing.⁷ Rossetti’s problem with one of the engraving companies, the Dalziel brothers, lay in his need to intricately fill every possible space, which left little margin for error. Indeed the process involved drawing directly onto the woodblock, the white of which was

⁶ Jack T Harris, “The Pre-Raphaelites and the Moxon Tennyson”, *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, May 1983, Vol 3, No 2, p 28

⁷ Ibid, p 29

then cut by the engravers and printed in relief. Rossetti believed that the Dalziel brothers butchered his work *"in the cutting and maiming."*⁸

St Cecily's success lies in what the engraving adds to the reading of Tennyson's "The Palace of Art" poem. The engraving is the first thing the reader sees, even before the title, and allows for a completely different understanding of the poem's meaning than Tennyson intended. When reading the poem without the engraving, it seems simply an identification of what gives life and soul meaning; that beauty should be noticed and understood and a life without beauty is no life at all. The first lines read;

*"I built my soul a lordly pleasure-house,
Wherein at ease for aye to dwell."*

The connotations of these lines and what follows do not stir up overt sexual imagery, rather a setting where the narrator's soul can be at peace and he can revel in everything that makes him happy. As the poem progresses some images are of ramparts, *"high on every peak a statue"*, mountain streams, wood nymphs, *"angels rising and descending"* and even of a landscape populated by Shakespeare, Plato and Milton.⁹ Many critics argue that Rossetti's engraving has nothing to do with the poem at all. For instance, Layard argues that Rossetti's *"intention... [was] to draw, not an angel at all, but a man masquerading as an angel...the clumsiness of the wings is accentuated for the purpose of making this more apparent."*¹⁰ Certainly Rossetti did not shy away from making things his own. Indeed, the wings in the engraving were badly drawn and this could be the reason why. When read with the engraving

⁸ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "Letter to William Bell Scott", 7th February 1857, in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti – The Formative Years 1835-1862*, Vol 2, William E Fredeman (Ed.), (Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur, 2002) pp 169-170

⁹ Alfred Lord Tennyson, "The Palace of Art", in *Poems*, (London: Edward Moxon, 1857) pp 113-127

¹⁰ George Somes Layard, *Tennyson and His Pre-Raphaelite Illustrators*, (London: Elliot Stock, 1894) p 58

Rossetti has portrayed a “*pleasure-house*” to include sexual as well as cerebral pleasure. The ‘forbidden’ imagery of the bitten apple and the physical activity of the men in the background also heightens any sexual reading of the poem. It seems strange that this illustration would be placed at the start instead of later in the poem as it seems to correspond to the later stanza;

*“Or in a clear-wall’d city on the sea,
Near gilded organ-pipes, her hair
Wound with white roses, slept St Cecily;
An angel look’d at her.”¹¹*

This stanza is certainly not sexual; indeed the angel is looking at her, not touching her at all. The engraving seems to envisage this stanza of the poem so why did Moxon not place it here? As stated earlier, perhaps Moxon, or even Tennyson, should have been more involved. Tennyson’s poem is meant to be allegorical - the Palace of Art is a representation of goodness; a place of repose for the narrator’s soul. At the end of the poem, when that soul is isolated from nature the beauty fades and the narrator suffers. Therefore, what appears to be a misreading of the poem may be a Pre-Raphaelite reading of the text. Love, emotion, sex, life, hunger and time are all depicted in the engraving and isn’t that the central idea of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood and of Tennyson’s poem? Nature, whatever form it takes, should not be suppressed.

What the engraving of ‘St. Cecily’ highlights, in terms of my argument, is that the placing of the engravings was crucial to the readers’ poetic understanding and could alter the perceived meaning of the poem significantly.

¹¹ Alfred Lord Tennyson, “The Palace of Art”, in *Poems*, (London: Edward Moxon, 1857) p 118

Holman Hunt's engraving for "*The Lady of Shalott*" is a fine example of this. (Plate 2) Holman Hunt did not procrastinate like Rossetti for he knew what he wanted to do with this poem. He had made sketches years before and would later paint a version of the engraving exhibited in 1905. (Plate 3) Although Tennyson's poem focuses on the tale of a doomed lady, shut away forever waiting for her knight in shining armour, the tale of the Lady of Shalott;

*attracted various Pre-Raphaelite artists through its theme of tragic love. The poem's demonstration of the melancholy aspects of love, and the spiritual state of suffering for love, fascinated the Pre-Raphaelites. The poem dealt with the popular topic of unrequited love, and the Lady of Shalott exemplified the unattainable woman, the cursed woman, and the woman sacrificing everything for a doomed love.*¹²

Again the engraving is placed at the start of the poem, before the title so as to influence the readers' preconceived idea of the text. The engraving depicts a central image of the lady wearing a volumous, almost Grecian gown. She stands, caught within a circular metal loom which coils around her body. Her hair is unbound, and flows along most of the top of the engraving whilst behind her two of the mirrors depict a knight on horseback - shown to be riding away - and one depicts Jesus on the cross. Her posture is twisted but one of strength and nobility, her right hand seems to tear at her bindings and her eyes are closed with her head bent. Famously Tennyson did not like the unbound hair, it is reported that Tennyson asked Holman Hunt "*Why did you make the Lady of Shalott with her hair wildly tossed about as if by a tornado?*"

¹² Erin Frauenhofer, "Men vs. Women: Illustrating 'The Lady of Shalott'", 2003, <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/tennyson/frauenhofer.html> (11/08/15)

continuing 'an illustrator ought never to add anything to what he finds in the text'."¹³

The placing of the engraving alters the poem's structure - aaaabcccb - as each stanza should have nine lines but the first stanza is split at line five because the reader has to turn the page to read line six onwards. Although not a difficult thing to do, this does alter the monotonous nature of the Lady's life as the rhyme is broken. As the poem progresses stanza four of Part one; stanza two of Part two; and stanza three and six of Part three are also placed on two pages. Within the poem there is no mention of a Jesus on the cross, especially displayed in the mirror. This religious imagery was added by Holman Hunt, who was himself deeply religious, but also adds another dimension to the reading of the poem. The poem reads;

*"And moving thro' a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear."*¹⁴

Clearly there is only one mirror, not three as depicted in the engraving. The room seems opulent (and was especially so in the later painting which blazed with colour). The

*"Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
Overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle imbowers"*¹⁵

¹³ "Object of the Month - October 2012, Engraved by John Thompson after William Holman Hunt, The Lady of Shalott, wood engraving, published in 'Poems' by Alfred Tennyson, Poet Laureate, London 1857", 2012 <http://www.racollection.org.uk/ixbin/indexplus?record=ART13847> (25/06/15)

¹⁴ Alfred Lord Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott", in *Poems* (London: Edward Moxon, 1857) p 69

¹⁵ Ibid, p 68

are only shown in respect of the fact it is gray, in that there is no colour in the engraving so the reader cannot see a *“magic web of colours gay”*.¹⁶ The poem also describes the flow of life outside her walls but the engraving also does not.

So what can be deemed successful about this engraving? I think it is the passion of the Lady in her resignation and the use of one setting to mirror the rest of the poem. Her stance is one of strength with eyes closed because she has come to terms with what has befallen her. Holman Hunt's mixture of resignation but also dignity and strength is interesting in that it imparts a message. Who is this isolated woman? How can she be repressed if she is strong? The central mirror shows Lancelot riding away towards Camelot, which will occur further into the poem, but she is strong in her realisation that he cannot save her. The mirror to her right depicts Jesus on the cross which again hints at the Lady's strength in that she is able to sacrifice herself by leaving the tower at the end of the poem. Holman Hunt's typological image allows him to impart the message of sacrifice on the Lady's part as well as alluding to the fate of many Victorian women who sacrificed their happiness to wed and raise a family or were caught in a web of many threads that Victorian society had fashioned for them. Indeed the following sums this up;

*“Or when the moon was overhead
Came two young lovers lately wed;
‘I am half sick of shadows,’ said
The Lady of Shalott”*¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid, p 69

The Victorian world *was* one of shadows for many women and this became a recurring motif in the work of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The Brotherhood's modernity was juxtaposed by their love of Arthurian legend and medievalism, the use of allegory and symbols central to achieving this.

Although the Moxon Tennyson was never deemed a commercial success in Moxon's lifetime, the remaining copies sold at a reduced price and even led to a second edition when Routledge took over. I believe the engravings add a great deal to the poems and enrich the readers' enjoyment of the edition. Tennyson may not have liked illustrated editions of his work but it was a trend that was to continue. The illustrated gift book was here to stay.

Figures



Plate 1:

Dante Gabriel Rossetti

The Palace of Art in "Poems"

(London: Edward Moxon) 1857

Engravers: Dalziel Brothers



Plate 2:

William Holman Hunt

The Lady of Shalott in "Poems"

(London: Edward Moxon) 1857

Engraver: J Thompson



Plate 3:

William Holman Hunt

The Lady of Shalott, 1905

Oil paint on canvas

1.88 x 1.46m

Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford,
Connecticut

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